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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS  
NSC FOR DORMANDY

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: SECENESETTER FOR VISIT OF FORMER  
PRESIDENTS BUSH AND CLINTON FEBRUARY 21

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SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) Nearly one-third of the population of Maldives was affected by the December 26 tsunami. A preliminary assessment estimates total losses at about 55 percent of GDP, with the greatest negative impact felt by the crucial tourism industry. Entire populations on some islands were displaced and had to be relocated to others, and the harbors, jetties and communications infrastructure in one-third of the country's 199 islands were destroyed. Despite these challenges, parliamentary elections were held on January 22, and pro-reform candidates made a solid showing. Your visit offers an opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to address the humanitarian crisis in Maldives while underscoring our interest in encouraging democratic reform in this moderate Muslim nation. End summary.

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TSUNAMI TOLL

SIPDIS  
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2. (U) 83 people were killed in the December 26 tsunami; 25 are still missing, and nearly 12,000 remain displaced. Nearly one-third of Maldives' entire population was affected in some way by the disaster. Of 199 inhabited islands, 20 experienced severe damage, while the buildings on another 13 islands were completely destroyed, forcing their populations to relocate to other islands. Harbors, jetties and other important communications infrastructure were destroyed in one-third of the islands. A draft needs assessment by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and UN estimated total losses (both direct and indirect) at between \$345-380 million, or 55 percent of GDP. The greatest impacts have been experienced in the tourism sector, which, according to some estimates, accounts for as much as 70 percent of GDP (since the disaster, arrivals are down by 80 percent) and fisheries. The widely dispersed population (290,000 people on 199 islands across 900 kilometers) poses special challenges for rehabilitation/reconstruction efforts.

3. (U) The Government of Republic of Maldives (GORM) responded quickly to the disaster, establishing a Ministerial Committee and Task Force the day of the catastrophe that succeeded in restoring communications to some of islands within 24 hours and delivering emergency relief supplies by the second day. The GORM has developed a comprehensive reconstruction plan (which it hopes to fund through a government-administered trust fund) that includes a blueprint for low-cost but durable housing and a \$21 million program for livelihood recovery.

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U.S. ASSISTANCE  
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4. (U) USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to date has contributed \$1.2 million to UNICEF for the UN Flash Appeal for Maldives, as well as \$163,000 (including transportation) in emergency relief supplies. In addition, the U.S. military donated 45,000 humanitarian daily rations and transported another one million pounds of relief and rehabilitation supplies from the capital to other islands, while the Combined Support Group-Sri Lanka/Maldives Detachment delivered nearly 350,000 liters of drinking water to seven devastated islands. The Federal Aviation Administration has arranged for the loan of navigational aids for the civilian airport in the capital of Male', while the U.S. Geological Survey will begin an assessment of the structural integrity of some of the affected islands on February 21.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM  
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5. (SBU) Before the tsunami, relations between the GORM and

advocates of democratic reform had grown especially embittered. The optimism of May-June 2004 (May saw the election of a Special Majlis to consider changes to the constitution; in June President Gayoom publicly endorsed some liberalization measures) evaporated after the Government, alarmed when an August demonstration in the capital became violent, clamped down on democratic debate, declared a State of Emergency and arrested numerous prominent reform advocates, including 12 Members of the Special Majlis. Although the State of Emergency was lifted in October, many remained in solitary confinement until November. By mid-December four of the MPs had been charged with sedition, which carries a potential life sentence, and reform proponents complained that GORM repression and intimidation had dissuaded many potential pro-reform candidates from running in parliamentary (or People's Majlis) elections scheduled for December 31. Immediately after the tsunami, the GORM dropped all charges and postponed elections until January 22. Despite significant logistical challenges, polls were held on time. While the observer mission from the Commonwealth Secretariat stopped short of calling the polls free and fair, it noted the election was "well organized and enabled a large number of people to exercise their right to vote." Pro-reform candidates made a particularly strong showing; one of the Special Majlis MPs who had been charged with sedition secured a seat in the capital. The new People's Majlis meets for the first time on February 27.

16. (SBU) Reform advocates are obviously encouraged by the results and hopeful that their new strength will help propel democratic change. They are not the only ones. The desire for reform in Maldives is deep-seated and widespread, especially among younger members of the population. Government efforts to temper that desire--or to discredit it to us as part of a "fundamentalist" plot--so far have been unsuccessful. We believe the President is sincere in saying he supports reform--but at his own pace and on his own terms. We have repeatedly advised our GORM interlocutors that attempts to stifle pro-reform sentiment risk turning it into something more violent and harmful. The recent elections and post-disaster reconstruction offer the GORM and its opponents a chance to start over. The GORM should be commended for holding the elections so soon after the tsunami--and encouraged to take the stalled process of reform forward.

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